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ABSTRACT

Because textbooks are essential instructional tools, they should play a major role in educational reform for excellence. Despite improvements in response to ethnic and women's movements, deterioration in textbook quality has occurred through competition for markets. Former Secretary of Education Terrel Bell observed in 1984 that educators should join together to pressure publishers for improved classroom products. Bell noted that up to 95 percent of classroom instruction is based on textbooks and related materials. Judgments about what to teach are particularly relevant for large school systems, which have high pupil mobility and an increasing problem of inadequate teacher preparation. Textbooks cost schools only about 0.8 percent of their budget, but sufficient time or resources often are not allowed for textbook adoption committees to make informed judgments about the textbooks they select. To improve quality, a consensus should be reached among the major constituencies involved in curriculum decisions, including subject matter specialists, state policymakers, national leaders, textbook publishers, and teacher educators. Task forces comprised of members from each group should be formed to refine subject core curriculum. States should increase information to districts about textbook adoptions so that districts can allocate adequate time and resources. Textbooks will undoubtedly improve, primarily from enlightened leadership at the state level. (CJH)

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in San Francisco, CA - 19 April 1986

(Symposium on STATE INITIATIVES FOR TEXTBOOK REFORM)

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I. As you know, textbook publishers have made many changes over the past decades in response to the very active ethnic groups and women's groups, and to the requests of adoption committees. In some cases there have been improvements, but in some cases there have been deteriorations. Now, along come the major national commission reports of 1983 which led to the Excellence Movement, and more recently to significant state legislation, which includes new investments in education once again -- but often with strings attached and perhaps too much regulation.

Among the state reforms, in my view, textbooks are finally being recognized for the crucial role they play in upgrading instruction and in the fulfillment of the Excellence Movement. As former Secretary Bell said at the AASA meeting in 1984, educators should join together to pressure publishers to improve their classroom products:

> "Current efforts to reform the schools will 'fall flat and fail' if textbooks are not improved.
>
> "Efforts to reform the schools cannot succeed unless these problems are resolved, ... because textbooks are so influential in determining what is taught in the schools.
>
> "Textbooks drive content, set the level of rigor, and influence the degree of intellectual challenge to students."

According to testimony before the excellence commission, he noted, up to 95 percent of classroom instruction in the country is based on textbooks and related materials.

> "If the textbook is 95 percent of the curriculum and if the content of the textbooks has been declining dramatically, then you have a serious problem. The education publishing industry has had an enormous influence on the school curriculum." ...

Secretary Bell continued:

> "State and local educators should address these problems cooperatively, to bring pressure on the publishing industry and to do a better job of writing and scrutinizing instructional materials. There is too much separate, go-it-alone action going on all across the nation," he said in Las Vegas.

As California's Superintendent of Public Instruction Bill Honig has written last fall,

> "At all levels, they have been clipped, cropped and culled of any distinguishing content, style or point of view. They have become bloodless, lifeless and bland. Former Secretary of Education Terrel Bell coined the phrase 'dumbing down' to describe this sorry state of affairs."

As Mr. Honig said in his recent book, The Last Chance for Our Children,

> "The final cause of textbook decline was the market itself -- easy textbooks sold better than hard ones. Visual pyrotechnics and graphite glitz have won out over content and substance."

These are harsh words for us in education and the textbook business to accept, but nevertheless these are the more polite versions of the judgments of a substantial segment of the textbook critics.

Whether you are a defender, critic, or bystander, I think we should applaud Secretary Bell for taking the initiative to put his finger on the textbook issue and to make it a hot button in the entire field of educational reform.

The reasons given by the critics are some of the very same reasons that we at Open Court used to justify our entry into the elementary textbook market over 20 years ago. It is our assumption that textbooks are essential instructional tools for all education. They should be the primary educational vehicle to translate theory into practice. In a rapidly changing world with all the problems of the information explosion, textbooks should provide the all-important

role of making thousands of daily judgments about what to teach, how to teach, the choice of materials, and classroom organization. The appropriate judgments are especially important for large school systems, with a high mobility of pupils, and with the increasing problem of inadequate preparation of teachers.

Since for all practical purposes textbooks determine the content, the pedagogy, the quality, and the scope of the curricula, in essence they determine the philosophy of education (or lack thereof) in each school system and in each building. Thus textbook decisions and textbook adoption committees are making some of the most important decisions and judgments that are made by school systems.

It is interesting to observe that these crucial decisions, which account for about 95% of what goes on in classrooms, only cost the schools about 0.8% of their budget. More often than not, school systems do not allow enough time or resources to make these decisions, nor do they recognize the huge potential multiplier effects and benefits if they would pay more attention to these decisions, or would invest a little more in more and better materials. I'm certain that Pat Donaghy has some comments about this.

II. If you agree that textbooks are extremely important, and if you agree that textbooks are not yet perfect, then Secretary Bell's suggestion of getting all the players together in one room is not a bad idea!

If we wish to stop the trendiness in textbooks which requires the textbook publishers to guess what will be popular so the books can pass the thumb test the next time around, then I think we need to organize this business differently. If we wish more stability, if we wish to improve the quality, and if we wish to establish a better use of our limited resources, and if we wish to reduce costs to schools, then we need to form a consensus among all the major constituencies that are involved in curriculum decisions. The obvious ones that come to my mind are:

. Subject matter specialists, researchers, scholars

. Policy-makers at the state level.

. Leaders at the national level

. Textbook publishers

. Teacher educators

. Test developers and statewide assessment specialists.

There need to be separate groups or commissions or task forces comprised of members from each of these groups for each basic subject. The objective would be then to arrive at and to constantly refine a core curriculum in each subject area. Learner verification? I hope we can have some comments, suggestions, and discussion about this later on.

III. If textbooks are so important, and if textbook selection can influence the quality so much, then another, more immediate, corollary of the importance of textbooks and textbook adoptions is that states should take a more active role and provide more information to local districts about textbook adoptions so that local districts would:

. Provide more time and resources to make adoptions

. Bring subject matter specialists, local community leaders, and outsiders into the process

. Not use the latest copyright date as the major factor in adoptions, but rather quality, suitability, research-base, effectiveness in classrooms, etc.

. Develop new tests which measure the higher order skills, such as Michigan, Illinois, and Minnesota are in the process of doing.

IV. I would like to conclude on a few notes of optimism. I believe that there is a real possibility that textbooks will be "smartened up" in the next few years due to many influences, but primarily to the enlightened leadership

at the state level. I am talking about the people in this room, for example. Bill Honig is an example. A lot of people are becoming sensitive to the issue.

Secondly, I am delighted that Secretary Bell's initiatives have borne fruit. After two meetings that he called, the Council of Chief State School Officers and NASBE started a project and task force on textbook reform, and more recently the Matsushita Foundation has sponsored two seminars of a new Textbook Council. I am rather hopeful that this new Textbook Council can provide clearinghouse and catalyst functions and be extremely valuable in the next few years.

All-in-all, despite the many hurdles, problems, and setbacks, I still remain hopeful that we will make significant progress in the next few years.

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